

The family in Euripides' *Bacchae*

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Fifth-century Athenian tragedy is frequently concerned with the family and its relation with the state. Euripides' *Bacchae*, however, is seldom seen in this light. But the family is central to this play too. Dionysus' opening speech sets the family at the heart of the play. The god gives a detailed account of his parentage: his father is Zeus, while his mother, Semele, is the daughter of Cadmus, the mythical founder of Thebes. He was born when Zeus' wife Hera took her revenge on Semele for having attracted Zeus' roving eye: a lightning bolt destroyed Semele but brought Dionysus to birth. Dionysus has travelled through much of Asia, only to return to the city of his mother, where he will be rejected by Pentheus – both the king of Thebes and a relative of the god's.

As the descendants of Cadmus the Thebans are closely related to Dionysus' family: indeed, Dionysus observes that he has driven 'all the female seed of Cadmus who are women out of their houses' in a state of madness as punishment for rejecting his rites. As Dionysus brings his speech to a close, he notes that Cadmus has transferred power in the state to his daughter's son Pentheus, immediately after saying that Semele (also a daughter of Cadmus) bore him to Zeus. By coming back at the end of his speech to the theme of his birth and his relationship to Cadmus with which he began it ('ring composition') he emphasizes how important they are. He ends by stating his intention to show Thebans that 'he is a god' (47), and to ensure that the 'city of Cadmus sees' this (63).

The rejected god

The rejection of Dionysus' divinity, therefore, takes on greater meaning: he has been rejected by his own family, who, it would appear, do not trust what their own relative, Semele, has to say about his divine origin. The offensiveness of their attitude is emphasized all the more by the fact that it is his own mother's sisters who claim that he was not Zeus' child, but had merely pretended this to cover the loss of her virginity in a respectable manner. His own family have rejected his status as a god. This insult, indirectly at least, has led to him travelling through Asia, before finally returning to Hellas, from which he has been a virtual exile in his formative years.

Cadmus, when he first appears, does better: he acknowledges the god Dionysus as the child of his daughter. In fact he has acknowledged the truth of the situation from the beginning: he has preserved the place of Semele's death as a precinct sacred to her, and Dionysus has caused a vine to grow around it. Despite such faith on the part of Cadmus, Pentheus still refuses to recognise the identity and divinity of his relative, and even treats him as a foreigner or stranger (*xenos*). So Pentheus' rejection of the god relates both to his divinity and to his relationship with the family.

Pentheus and Dionysus

The exploits of this tragic family are taken further in the play. It opens with a son, Dionysus, wishing to establish the honour of his mother, Semele. It closes with a very different scene: a mother claiming honour for ripping her son to pieces in the belief that he was a lion cub. This twist gives further depth to the notion of family in the play: Dionysus does indeed establish his divinity, but at considerable cost to his own family. The punishment

for Pentheus is a direct response to that inflicted on Dionysus himself. Pentheus had been blind not to see Dionysus' true ancestry, and had refused to believe his descent from Zeus and Semele. Dionysus, on the other hand, engineered a situation where Pentheus found himself rejected by Agave, his own mother. Just as Pentheus was blind, so too his mother was made blind to his identity, and destroyed him. This blindness extended through the family in both acts of rejection: Semele's sisters had rejected her relationship with Zeus, while near the end of the play a messenger gives a graphic description of how 'the daughters of Cadmus', 'mother Agave and her relatives from the same seed' were overcome by Dionysus' power. Ignorance within the family of the relationships would seem to have disastrous consequences.

The messenger continues by relating how 'the mother began the rite of murder', while Pentheus called out, 'Mother, I am your child, Pentheus, whom you bore in the house of Echion [Echion is Pentheus' father]. Pity me, mother, and do not kill your child for my errors.' These words echo those of Dionysus at the beginning of the play: the mother does not recognise her child, just as Pentheus has not recognised Dionysus' true descent. Indeed, there is a verbal echo between lines 2 and 1119 which emphasizes the parallel:

Dionysus, whom once the daughter of Cadmus bore (2)
Pentheus, whom you bore in the house of Echion (1119)

The emphasis in these two lines on the descent of the two characters, and the similarity in structure between the two lines, brings to the audience's attention the close parallel between the two situations: Pentheus is rejected by his mother, while Dionysus is believed to be other than he is, due to false allegations about his parentage.

Types of 'blindness'

In another play set in Thebes, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the theme of blindness takes centre stage: Oedipus taunts the seer Teiresias, who is literally blind, with being 'blind both in eyes and mind', while Teiresias is eventually goaded into attacking Oedipus for being blind to who he is and what he has done and who he is living with. The same figure, Teiresias, also appears in this play with a similar role. Pentheus enters at the beginning of the play confident that Dionysus is no god and that his worship has nothing to commend it. His confidence is not shaken when he sees the respected figures of Teiresias and Cadmus (again described as a relation, 'the father of my mother', 250) engaged in that worship: indeed, he sees their reverence towards Dionysus as laughable. Teiresias' immediate response is to dismiss Pentheus' words as ignorant, despite their fluent sound. The prophet then speaks at length of the power of Dionysus, in part confirming what the god has already indicated in his opening speech about his descent and power. He even instructs Pentheus to obey him, telling him that he is sick in thought, and that he should take part in the rites. Pentheus, like Oedipus, is so sure of himself that he dismisses the advice he is given, even when it is followed by an appeal from his grandfather Cadmus – who also points out that, if it is accepted that Semele has given birth to a god, this will bring great credit to their family. Pentheus, therefore, is blind to the identity of a member of his own family, despite the attempts of respected members of that family to educate him.

Rejected warnings

In this way Pentheus is offered an opportunity to adopt the worship of Dionysus in a rational and respectful manner. This he rejects, and as a result must be driven out of his mind and made to worship the god in another way. In effect he has not seen what there is in his family, and will have to pay the price, just as Oedipus was compelled to pay for his own lack of insight. The warnings to Pentheus are clear, and come from those close to him, and yet they are rejected. Oedipus did not have quite such luck. Both men, however, transgressed the established rules of the family, and found themselves destroyed by that family.

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